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BUILDING BRIDGES FROM INCARCERATION TO COMMUNITY
COLLEGE: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL REFLECTIONS ON YOUNG
BLACK MEN'S JOURNEY FROM THE 'INSIDE' OUT

by

Jeffery L. McGoy

B.S., Southern Illinois University, 1998

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master's of Arts.

Department of Speech Communication
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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INTRODUCTION

“Education is all a matter of building bridges.”

Ralph Ellison

America has an ongoing epidemic that continues to affect society and Black men. Even for me, as a young Black male, growing up in a small town in America, the odds of success were slim and prison seemed more like a norm, than an option. In his book *The Envy of the World: On Being a Black Man in America* (2003), Ellis Cose gives a description of the future that many Black males see as inevitable. “Unless we somehow change our present course, one out of four Black boys living in America today will spend at least part of his life locked down” (Cose, 2003, pp. 8-9). American prisons are full of African-American men, young and old, while statistics show there has been a constant increase in the number of incarcerated Black men over the past 30 years. According to the article, *Prison Population Exceeds Two Million*:

About 10.4% of the entire African-American male population in the United States aged 25 to 29 was incarcerated, by far the largest racial or ethnic group—by comparison, 2.4% of Hispanic men and 1.2% of white men in that same age group were incarcerated. According to a report by the Justice Policy Institute in 2002, the number of black men in prison has grown to five times the rate it was twenty years ago. Today, more African-American men are in jail than in college. In 2000 there were 791,600 black men in prison and 603,032 enrolled in college. In 1980, there were 143,000 black men in prison and 463,700 enrolled in college.

Prisons attempt to prepare men for reentry to the community. There are rehab and education initiatives in prison --- but few resources are available to assist the transition

for men once they are released.

“Inmates are being released with many issues including limited work experience, low levels of educational or vocational skills, and multiple health issues (e.g., mental health needs, substance abuse histories, and high rates of infectious diseases)” (Uggen et al., 2005). These young Black men need a path away from prison and if incarcerated, they need a bridge to success. Working for the civil rights movement, Belinda Robnett (1997) coins the term ‘Bridge Leaders’:

In the civil rights movement, many so-called grassroots followers or organizers operated as what I term Bridge Leaders who utilized frame bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation to foster ties between the social movement and the community; and between prefigurative strategies (aimed at individual change, identity, and consciousness) and political strategies (aimed at organizational tactics designed to challenge existing relationships with the state and other societal institutions). (p. 19)

In the civil rights movement, Bridge Leaders did the work of reaching out to the people with lack of knowledge about the movement and pulled them closer so they could gain knowledge, build relationships and become empowered. The word ‘grassroots’ defines the community which in this instance, defines the civil rights movement of African-Americans as well as Caucasians who followed, volunteered and organized to create opportunities for those who were oppressed and whose rights were being abused or neglected. The bridge represents working together, piece by piece, moment by moment to create opportunities for others to cross from one place (poverty, discrimination, racism, prejudice, violation of one’s rights, etc.) to another place (equality, prosperity, unity, and

justice). Each person who participates in this act or movement is making significant changes in our society and in our world, which in turn makes for a positive impact on others. I am where I am today because of the bridges that have been created not only for myself, but for others in my generation and those who will follow. It is imperative that we, especially those in academia or social service fields, continue building bridges for those who still face obstacles and challenges rooted in historical racial and economic oppression.

I strongly believe that education, in particular community colleges, can be the bridge that closes this gap for young Black men recently released from prison. The services provided by community colleges are beneficial for assisting these men in re-entering society. Today, I want to be a Bridge Leader, working particularly with incarcerated young Black males, eager and deserving of a second chance but needing resources. In my role as teacher, administrator, performer and social activist, I am able to continue the work that has been done by so many extraordinary Bridge Workers. In this study, I will explore my own journey from a community with few opportunities to my current position as Director of Student Support Services at Shawnee Community College (SCC), where I am currently in a position to give back to others the support, encouragement and advocacy that I received. I believe strongly in the old African Proverb which says “each one teach one.” This saying originated from slavery and means if we each take time to teach and help another learn, we will empower one another and help one another through our own lessons or life experiences. I work as a Bridge Worker for young Black previously-incarcerated men by facilitating their re-entry into society through higher education. The experiences from my past and the work I am doing have prepared

me for the position I currently hold and provide me with the necessary tools to work for these men upon their release from prison.

The themes within this research are based on my personal background and modeled after the people who worked as Bridge Leaders for me. My focus is on young African-American youth who are incarcerated in the local prisons in Southern Illinois. I want to reflect on my own journey from Cairo, Illinois to the Director of Student Support Services at SCC, acknowledging and honoring the advocates/resources and personal values that guided and supported me. Drawing on the principle and success of my role models, I will focus on how I can build bridges for young Black men who are currently incarcerated and who deserve a second chance upon their release. Specifically, I will focus on the advocates who supported my educational pursuit. Education, for African-Americans, serves as the key to a better life and there were many people who assisted me in finding my post-secondary path. For example, there was Don Shaner, who convinced me to enroll at Shawnee Community College. Richard Carvahal recruited me to Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) because of my love for acting and performing. Dr. Elyse Pineau was a judge during one of the high school forensic meets and wrote words that gave me confidence and helped me believe in the talent that I knew I had but did not understand how to use. Her support landed me in the Speech Communication department for my Bachelor's degree where I was the first one to get a college degree on either side of my family. I have had many people play a major part in my life but these individuals provided me the professional blueprint I needed to get started on my future. Now I am working on my Master's degree in the hope of opening educational doors for others. The

value of education was instilled in me by my family and community advocates who encouraged me and helped open doors on my educational path.

This research report begins with my personal journey from Cairo to college and the values, advocates and challenges that shaped me. Based on these principles I will review the scholarship and prison advocacy work of Bridge Workers in academia and the prison system whose work resonates with my own. In particular I will focus on the work ‘within’ in terms of Black masculinity and incarceration, and the bridgework ‘outside’ that builds practical, concrete steps to success. Given my belief in education as the best tool for success and community colleges as best prepared to serve incarcerated young men, I will then briefly describe the programs and opportunities offered at SCC. Finally, I will describe and thematize my professional journey to becoming a community college administrator and the initiatives I can take to serve this population.

PERSONAL HISTORY: CONTEXT, COMMUNITY, VALUES

Growing up in Cairo, Illinois, I was exposed to a reality that was no fairytale.

Cairo, with a *population* of 2,831, is located in Alexander County at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers; its history is built on gambling, hustling, prostitution and big business. General Ulysses S. Grant spent time at Fort Defiance State Park near Cairo during the Civil War and the town has unique, distinct architecture that represents its history from the Civil War. Mansions, museums and other tourist attractions can be seen next to abandoned buildings. There have always been racial and social problems but they reached an all time high in the 1960's when a Black man, home from the military, was found hung in a jail cell. The rebellion from the Black community drew nationwide media attention, which led to bringing in the National Guard, civil rights leaders, protests, marches and race wars. During the late 1970's and 1980's, things began to wear on the very foundation of the community. Jobs were leaving, people were moving out and the community I knew during my youth no longer existed. The 2000 census listed Alexander County with a 27.7% poverty rate, which was the highest in Southern Illinois. The census also showed that in Alexander County, only 67.0% of the population has a high school diploma and 6.9% have a Bachelor's Degree. The crime rate in Cairo began to increase and the influence of drugs swept through my community like a plague. African-American males were the primary ones selling drugs and when many of the older men were caught and incarcerated, the drug business was handed over to younger men. Soon, youth my age were deep into the drug game. Drugs had become a national epidemic at this time and not even small, rural communities were immune to the power of the substances and the money that accompanied them. In a community that did not have many job opportunities,

there was a sense of urgency to get drugs which created dangerous situations. Welfare became a mainstay for some families due to the lack of economic resources. The journey for a young Black man to find his masculinity was a challenge in this town and across the world. “For the black male, achieving masculinity is complicated by threats of marginality and anomie that plague his race, and if he is of lower-income status, his social class” (Majors and Billson, 1992, p. 7). There were many men of color looking to find some way to maintain and survive, or a way to feed their addiction, and this frustration and anger led to crime and eventually incarceration. That was the reality for a young Black man in Cairo. It was no fairytale, but it was a story that echoed on a National level where almost 10% of young Black men are incarcerated.

So, how did I, and others like me, avoid this path? For me, it began in my home and community, where I was taught lessons that would prevent me from going down the path that many of my peers had taken. Through service to the community, I learned the importance of the previously-mentioned African proverb “each one, teach one.” The women in my family modeled service and compassion for others. My grandmother was a strong force showing and teaching the value and importance of doing for others while not expecting things in return. My mother, who works at a super maximum security prison, provides similar service to the men incarcerated. The power of positive influence was very present in my life and I was constantly being told that I would be something one day and that I had a bright future ahead of me. As I reflect on some of the young males who got in trouble, I remember many of them never feeling as if there was a future for them. They were constantly scolded and neglected whether it was not receiving adequate clothing, money, and food or having to live in homes that were not decent, the future was

not one that these males could honestly look forward to. I was in a privileged situation by being fortunate to have the material things, the love, the lessons and the experiences of seeing positive actions take place right in my home and family. For example, the neighbors had rights to discipline any of the youth on the block. There were rules like not traveling out of sight from anyone who sat on their porches and surveyed the neighborhood. Any suspicious people or behavior was quickly confronted and addressed. There was conscious mentoring from the older African-Americans about what was expected of the youth as well as the struggle of the past to make sure the present and future would not have to meet the same fate as those who died before having the opportunities we had. Without family and members of the community, my future might have been uncertain or followed a negative trend.

Many lessons were given to me about the history of African-Americans, not only in the United States but in my very community. My uncles, aunts, and mother marched for civil rights during the race riots of Cairo in the 1960's. I had many talks with local civil rights leader, Mr. Charles Koen, about the struggle and what the future held for Black people, and in particular, Black men. My grandmother kept several paintings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in her home and she would tell me how special a man he was to her because of his fight for equality and justice. I learned more about many national figures, not in school but in my home; as an adult, I now find this quite strange. In school, I learned all about other figures who did great things but only a few of them were African-American. If it were not for my uncles and others speaking to me about these individuals, I would not know my history. I often wonder if that plays a part in why Black men suffer in finding an identity. For me, knowing that there were intelligent, talented,

hard-working, good-hearted men and women who looked like me was motivation to work to become something in life – to dream and to want to help others in the process. My family and community stressed that anyone can have an abundance of mental, physical, emotional, and social wealth through education. Those lessons were a constant reminder to work hard and take advantage of opportunities given. I remember the story I was told about life being like a quarter: everything had two sides to it and one is full of opportunity while the other was full of heartache, pain and potential for disaster. Listening to the stories of my elders and doing research regarding the history of the struggle, it was apparent that there were difficulties and opportunities that many faced. That history served as a constant reminder of the work which was put in by many in order to make it better for those who followed.

My journey began as a child with the upbringing I had from my grandmother and mother. I was raised by my grandmother for the first thirteen years of my life. Her supervision was full of love, support and firm discipline. Her philosophy was that I was someone else's child and even though I was her grandson and her own flesh, she was responsible for me because the role she took on was one of care-giver, nurturer, and provider. As I reflect back on those times, I recall how my grandmother said she would always provide me with a roof over my head, food on the table, and unconditional love. She never wavered on those necessities but she offered much more! I remember the time she taught me the hard lesson about respect for women. I came in the house one day when she had some of her ladies friends over, and I did not acknowledge them or say excuse me. She whipped me in front of those ladies and told me I would always respect my elders and women. If I would receive water guns or cap guns for Christmas she would

hide them, telling me the dangers of playing with guns and the consequences that could happen. I was made to do my homework first thing when I came home, followed by dinner and then recreation time. Yet, she would constantly tell me she loved me and would provide comfort by physical affection through hugs, kisses and embracing. She told me the valuable stories of struggle that she endured as a child and an adult. She talked about not having a formal education because she dropped out of school to take care of her siblings to show me why education was so important for me to have a successful life and not suffer or struggle. My grandmother's wisdom, kindness, and firm stances on what is right were respected by many. There were always people at our house and anyone who came over was fed and treated like family. At her home-going service, many people spoke of how she was like a mother to them and how they appreciated her.

When I was thirteen, my mother moved to Cairo from St. Louis, Missouri and that portion of my life took a dramatic turn. Gone were the days of getting whatever I wanted or being treated like a baby. Now, I had to work hard for things and become wiser. My mother wanted me to be able to look at things from a critical perspective. I was very naïve and gullible so she had to work hard so I could break some habits that could be critical in my development as a teenager and young man. She always said she raised me for the world and not for her home. She said that no one in the world would love me like her or my family would, and that I had to prepare for what was in store when I left the comfort of home. But she always said I could return home no matter what I did or where I went. The lesson was to be strong, learn how to take care of myself and to be able to recognize that not everyone would be my ally or my enemy. She would make sure homework and discussions about what I learned each day were a norm every evening. My mother was the

one person people came to when they had problems or situations in their lives. There were people of all different races, ages and backgrounds that spent many hours in our living room, talking about life with my mother. I sat in on many of those conversations as I pretended to read or work on my artwork, just to listen and learn. My mother was great at having others look at situations from different angles and question how they should have or could approach each one. She never gave answers but did the work by motivating others to look at things critically and focus on self. I take that approach now in life by looking at self and analyzing every situation before I act or react. Her work continues today just as it did when I was a youth.

The foundation of education and hard work were already planted from the examples in my parents. Both my mother and father attended universities in the state of Illinois. My mother went to Eastern Illinois and my father was a star athlete at Bradley University, but neither graduated with a degree. It was embedded in my brain that I would go to college and I would get a degree so even if I was not focused on it, that seed was already planted. Because it had been in the 1960's when they were attending college, times had changed and the process of getting started was not something either one of them knew. Yet, their work ethic kept them employed and with really decent jobs, despite not having a college degree. My father, up to the time when he passed away in 2000, was Director of Recreation with the Peoria Park District in Peoria, Illinois, for the less fortunate youth in the community. When I would visit in the summers, I would be jealous of the love and respect my father received from other children. Everyone looked up to him, and respected him and his authority. He would get on anyone who did not follow the rules but his huge heart also caused him to go above and beyond for those kids who were

in need of something. Everyone knew my father in that area and knew he cared about the youth. The same can be said about my mother who worked several jobs in the social service field and school district. Many days, my mother would talk to kids who were missing school or getting into fights. She would talk to them about their behavior and how she knew they could do better. Yet, her work in corrections is what really stands out to me.

My mother worked at two prison facilities in Southern Illinois. She currently works at Tamms Correctional Center, a super maximum security prison, which holds some of the most dangerous inmates. The pain and frustration runs deep for her as she sees young, old and all types of Black men incarcerated for crimes ranging from not paying child support, drugs, rape and even murder. Her pain comes from seeing the majority of those inmates who are incarcerated are Black men, and having a child, who is a Black man, brings a certain fear and protection for me, her son. She acts as a mother figure to the men by providing words of encouragement and support to lift their spirits even though this act is not supported by many of the officers, nurses or doctors who serve these men. I saw her in tears, many nights, as she discussed the harsh treatment of some of the inmates, primarily African-American men. She would talk about how these men had committed crimes and had to pay the price for their actions but that they were still human beings and someone's child. Being a mother of an African-American male, she lives every day with fears of what could happen to me not only through my own possible actions but those of others. The reasons behind many of the men being incarcerated are many: some are there because of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, making bad decisions, lack of education, lack of support from family, mental illness and the list goes

on. Many social factors also play a role in why many of these men are incarcerated or make the wrong choices. Every day, my mother talks to me about making the right choices and trusting my instincts about everything I am involved in.

My mother always stressed education to me as a means to be successful, comfortable and stable. Those who have knowledge have power, which brings confidence, strength, creativity and opportunities. Not going to college was never an option for me. It was a choice that was made definite by my mother. When asked what I would do after high school, she answered confidently to others that I would be going to college. Even before I could answer, she spoke those words for me which was planting that seed and eliminating any other options.

The choice of getting an education was a clear vision for me, but what I would major in or do was not. This is the point at which advocates outside family played an essential role in my success. In the following section, I describe the 'Bridge Workers' outside of my family whose practical strategies and support enabled me to take concrete steps toward a college degree. In discussion with my high school guidance counselor, Don Shaner, I began the process of considering what I wanted to do, professionally, for the rest of my life. Art was my love but the research I did confirmed that artists did not make much money. There was the allure of acting but I realized of how difficult it was to become a professional actor. Mr. Shaner began the work of revealing options and explaining the process of attending college. This was the first time anyone had taken the time to do these practical steps for and with me. Here was a Caucasian, older gentleman from Cape Girardeau, Missouri, talking to me about scholarships for minorities and taking me step by step, to get enrolled into college. These were lessons that were needed

in order for me to be successful in the process. Building my spirits and painting a visual picture was critical and he did that work. Letting me know the realities of how there was a need for African-American males to attend colleges was equally important. Finally, teaching me the practical steps for applying, funding and attending college was a crucial 'bridge' toward my dreams. I enrolled at the local community college, but I did not take a class there because my plans were altered by another opportunity.

Richard Carvahal, an employee at SIUC in a department and position I would assume years later, brought the idea of attending a four-year university to my mind. The community college was as far as my mind could previously conceive. I had two hard-working parents but always felt money was a major issue. Neither parent saved money toward my college education yet they both spoke in favor of me attending college. Financial aid was not an option because the income of either one was too high, so loans were the way and that was frowned upon because of the impending debts it could cause. So, I set my aim no higher than the community college for what seemed like practical necessity. Richard challenged me by laying out a plan regarding how the university would be the best route for me considering my love for art and performance. He had a brother who was in the Theater Department so his credibility regarding me going to SIUC was accepted. In the African-American community, credibility is crucial. Many of the stories I was told talked about how many slaves were falsely led to believe in certain ideas and words from Caucasians, especially men, and one must always be cautious of what is being sold before you buy into it. Another lesson I was taught from my grandmother was that action speaks louder than words. When Richard offered to take me around and get my admissions application, housing and classes taken care of, I knew that he and his help

was legitimate and I was open to accepting the help. Richard Carvahal was instrumental in recruiting me to SIUC, but he was not the first to open that door and encourage me to pursue those dreams.

During that same time, I remember meeting Dr. Elyse Pineau who worked at SIUC in the Speech Communication Department. Richard and I met Elyse and she offered to assist me when I was ready to declare Speech Communication as my major, partly because I came into the university through a selective admissions program because of my low ACT scores. Elyse, a Caucasian woman from Canada, right from the start showed confidence in me, support and genuine care, which gave me the feel of having my “mother” away from home. I could feel that she was sincere and I felt comfortable when she would work with me on areas I was not strong in and explain things to me so that I could understand. My trust and respect for her were something that really helped me get through the sometimes challenging and stressful periods where I questioned if I was college material, if I was even supposed to be there, or if I could succeed.

My prior educational experiences, plus my own lack of enthusiasm regarding academics, did not prepare me well for the competitive nature of college life. I felt more comfortable about the life lessons I was taught than the classroom lessons, because in high school, none of my teachers were of the same ethnic background. Also, not many of our teachers even lived in my town, not to mention anyone living in my neighborhood. So, I felt, as did many adults, that those teachers did not really care if we, the predominantly African-American kids, succeeded. Their children did not even attend the same school as my classmates and I did. I remember in science class spending time talking about our teacher’s experience in the military and never any time about Science.

So, when I got to the university and took a science class, I failed within the first two weeks and just stopped going to class. I was devastated by this and blame him, along with myself, for not being prepared or learning more that I should have back then. To have someone like Dr. Pineau understand my background, allow a space for me to openly discuss my upbringing, understand my deficiencies, and most importantly, care, was very important.

I loved performing and decided to venture off to take some Theater classes when I met Dr. David Krasner. He was a Jewish man who spent time researching the history of African-Americans in Theater and had grown up in the New York area. I liked him from day one, even when my classmates questioned his unique teaching style. One moment I will never forget was an exercise we had to do in regards to the six basic actions of acting: to beg, or plead, to seduce, to dominate, to destroy, to celebrate and to accuse. I was eager to do this performance and I wanted to compete with the best of the best in the Theater department. I wanted to go toe to toe with them and prove I could compete, mainly to prove this to myself. During my session, I quickly remembered how aggressive one classmate could be, so I decided to let her come out strong and I would play it cool then flip the switch and overtake her. It worked and Mr. Krasner asked me to stay after class to discuss my work which he called brilliant. He asked me how I knew that or when did I learn that technique. I explained to him that growing up in the neighborhood I did, that was a survival technique. Sometimes, you must appear to lose in order to win. When someone picks a fight, you do not always have to fight because you can never beat someone at their game. If you always play your own game, you will always win. David came to Cairo to meet my mother and see where I grew up. David constantly pushed me

and told me I could make it in the big city and professionally as an actor. He believed in me so much that he encouraged me to audition for the prestigious Yale and New York University's graduate acting programs. He even paid to fly me out to New Haven, Connecticut and trained me in the days leading up to the audition performance. Although I was not selected, his believing in me and going that extra mile to help me, gave me the confidence to give things a try even if it seemed bigger than life to me.

The last advocates who really impacted my life were Mr. and Mrs. Al Farmer. The Farmers were an older African-American couple who were friends of one of my uncles and they chose to help me since their children were all grown. Mrs. Farmer worked for the Department of Children and Family Services and gave me a job working closely with her and other case workers. She introduced me to the social service field as a Male Advocate during my summer home from college. Mr. Farmer worked in Rehabilitation Services in Anna, Illinois. They both told me and my mother they would pay four years of college for me only if I graduated in those four years. They would send care packages to me when I lived on campus and even spending money. After graduation, I went to their home to thank them and ask how I could ever repay them. The answer I got changed my life forever. Mr. Farmer informed me that the only way I could repay them was by devoting my life to helping others. Here were two people I had no relation to and who had no children in college, paying for my college, which was not a cheap expense and all I had to do to repay them was to help others for the rest of my life. It was simple for me. My foundation at home was already set with providing service and this was the motivation I needed. I did not want to let my family or this couple down. And last but not

least, I did not want to let myself down. My grandmother always told me to whom much is given, much is expected too.

Every job I have held, from after I graduated college to the present, has been in the social service or educational fields. I have worked with youth from inner cities, small towns, affluent areas, all ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. I spent many hours working and giving to those who needed it, even to the point where my actions were considered ‘sucking up’ or ‘overachiever’ by many co-workers. Not many knew my charge and passion for providing service and trying to change lives as mine had been changed by so many who saw potential in me. Those who helped me did not see the color of my skin, unless to make me aware of the opportunities that was available for me because of it. They did not judge me because of where I grew up. They believed in me and gave me a blueprint for constructing a future. An old African proverb says “It takes a village to raise a child” and in my life, the village workers were a collection of people from different walks of life, with many different teachings but with one common goal...building bridges to help me and others travel from one place of uncertainty and doubt to one of familiarity and promise. I followed those paths and learned along the journey that I was eager to do the same works for others. It was the lesson plans, from each person, that I studied and evaluated. I also looked internally to see how important their acts were on my life and confirmation that if it changed my life, it sure could change others. I set out to build bridges as I looked back at the many which were built for me and others to follow. As the decades change, so must each and every one of us change. The values and lessons I have gained are what I need to continue to do the work. The need is great in the African-American community and especially for young African-American males who are

currently incarcerated, but who deserve a second chance upon re-entry to society. My job, my responsibility, is to give back and help those who can not see their future, make it a positive reality.

SCHOLARS, ACTIVISTS and ADVOCATES

In order to explore the issue of mass incarceration, performance and pedagogy; I turn to the following scholars, activists, and grassroots organizers, who create a language to describe my personal journey as a Bridge Leader. A reading of Michael Eric Dyson, Michael Keck, and others, can provide theoretical support to my strong belief in how these men's future can be strengthened by those who take a supported interest in them and the ways in which this can be done. Each scholar shares experiences or ongoing research to break this cycle.

For many Black families and communities, prison has personal connections. Scholar Michael Eric Dyson knows this all too well, as his brother Everett is currently serving life in prison. Dyson has dedicated a fair amount of his scholarly work in relation to Black men, incarceration, and education. In his 2004 *Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, Dyson includes a letter he wrote to his brother Everett. The letter addresses several issues such as trust, empathy, love, encouragement, and hope. Dyson is very reflexive of his privilege as Black man on the outside yet he is well aware of the interconnectiveness and possibilities that he too could easily be behind bars as well. In the letter, Dyson writes "I grew up in the urban poverty of Detroit, as did the other members of my family. Therefore I understand not only from a scholarly viewpoint, but from a personal viewpoint, limited life options and the kind of hopelessness and social despair they can breed in a person" (Dyson, 2004, p. 23). Dyson brings a sociological understanding of Black men's expectations and limited possibilities when growing up in impoverished communities. He further explains how prison has become a rite of passage for countless young Black men who see themselves fulfilling a life expectation. This is why the inside

work can be so transformative. In his book, *Know what I Mean? Reflections on Hip Hop* (2004) Dyson talks about the environment of prison life and how young Black men learn and gain knowledge. “Under these circumstances, there is little merit to the notion that prison can provide a space of intellectual engagement and liberation” (Dyson, 2004, p. 20).

Author Nathan McCall (1994), in his book *Make Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America*, discussed in dept about his time being incarcerated and the lessons he learned. One of those lessons was from another inmate about finding a trade so when he left prison, so it would help him with parole. It was more about how most men are not able to be rehabilitated. “Most inmates couldn’t be requalified because they had never been qualified for anything before going to prison” (McCall, 1994, p. 206). This seems like a sad reality, but one that is true. Many men did not hold jobs before they were incarcerated and if you focus on the young Black men, many of them did not finish high school, so their skill level is definitely not at a level which would help them when they were released.

McCall also talked about a situation that most men run into after being released...recidivism. Many men are not able to strain away from the lifestyle which led to their imprisonment in the first place and end up returning to prison. “I’d read somewhere that 85 percent of inmates return to prison within five years of being released. Just about all the guys I knew who’d gotten out were returning so fast it seemed they had been home on furlough rather than parole” (McCall, 1994, p. 227). The constant reminder of being an ex-con has to way heavy on each man along with other things, including: not being able to find a job, finding a place to live, having to report to their parole officer,

staying away from alcohol, drugs and stay out of trouble. McCall also touches on a grey area that many people do not realize. Some men do get accustomed to the jail or prison environment. He wrote about the times he actually missed the solitude and security of prison. Many men feel the same way. As crazy as it sounds, having the feeling of comfort, no worries about being labeled, a place to lay your head, food to eat, recreation, and rules, at times, beats the alternative of having freedom, trying to deal with the questions, the stares, the hardships, the rejections, the reminder of being a felon, labeled a convict and all the negative stereotypes that follow.

In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2010) argues that mass incarceration of Black men is a form of discrimination not seen since the days of segregation. America is facing a great civil rights challenge, which she describes as the new Jim Crow. After many years of civil rights work highlighted in the 1950's and 1960's, Alexander argues that the work is not done. By her own accounts, Alexander wrote the book in order to inspire "people who care deeply about racial justice" (Alexander, 2010, p. xiii).

Alexander's work stands out as an authoritative voice on this subject due to her lifelong civil rights advocacy and litigation work. She is a former law clerk for Justice Harry Blackmun on the U. S. Supreme Court. In addition, she also served for several years as the Director of the Racial Justice Project at the ACLU of Northern California. Alexander, a Stanford Law School Professor and 2011 NAACP Image Award Winner for Outstanding Literary Non-Fiction, has called for like-minded civil rights activists to enter into the work of changing the vicious cycle of the mass incarceration of Black men.

Alexander also links the second-class citizenry of Blacks during segregation to that of current day ex-offenders who are discriminated in housing, education, voting, and employment. In addition, the new Jim Crow operates in a vicious system that renders Black men as invisible once they receive a felony. Alexander goes on to add:

What has changed since the collapse of Jim Crow has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it. In the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt. So we don't. Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind.

(p. 2)

Throughout the book, Alexander gives startling statistics about the state of Black men and their disproportionate representation in American prisons. Alexander states that, as a society, we should do more for not only Black men, but for all to have justice. "Fully committing to a vision of racial justice, grassroots, bottom-up advocacy on the behalf of 'all of us' will require a major reconsideration of policies, staffing, strategies, and messages" (Alexander, 2010, p. 247).

The biggest hurdle that ex-offenders face is the lack of supportive networks and assistance required to become a productive citizen. Most of society treats ex-offenders as unworthy of second chances thus dampening any hope of rehabilitation. Alexander points this out, "Criminals, it turns out, are the social group in America we have permission to hate... They are entitled to no respect and little moral concern. Like the 'coloreds' in the years following emancipation, criminals today are deemed a characterless and purposeless

people, deserving of our collective scorn and contempt” (Alexander, 2010, p. 138).

Activists continue to work to find the humanity in these countless young men who have so much to offer our society.

Throughout the years, performance studies have proven to be a constructive site for social activism and advocacy work. This is no more apparent than in the works of Michael Keck. He is an internationally renowned performing artist who teaches creative writing and facilitates professional workshops. He has performed his activist work at universities, New York Broadway, schools, and community centers. Most notable is his work in correctional facilities where he visits prisoners, listens to their narratives, and creates activists performances designed to bring education, awareness and advocacy for those who entrust him with their most intimate stories from cells. Keck sits on the Advisory Board of the Prison Creative Arts Project at the University of Michigan Ann Arbor and on the panel for the PEN Prison Creative Writing Program. For many years, Keck has tirelessly used his skills as an acclaimed performance artist to shed light on mass incarceration. His work gives voice to those behind prison walls who have been silenced, marginalized, and forgotten. Keck seeks answers to the question, “Why are there more men of color between the age of 15-35 in prison than in schools and universities?” in his activist performances thus challenging society on unfair policies. According to Megan Grumbling’s article “Learning about Life Behind Bars” in the *Boston Phoenix*, Keck uses his voice, on the outside, in order to give voice to those on the inside. In his one man performance “Voices in the Rain”, Keck shares powerful stories from our prisons and communities which attempt to highlight the despair of individuals trapped inside the prison industrial complex. In addition, he also addresses the impact

mass incarceration has on communities. Keck's activist performance is grounded in education. Grumbling describes Keck's position that it costs more to incarcerate a person than it does to educate one, and expresses education as a means for transforming individuals who have found a lack of hope in the criminal justice system. His work lends itself to critical and engaged conscious pedagogy where citizens find their own voice.

Keck's work provides a space for prisoners to discover alternate forms of identity which stand against traditional notions of prison life. According to the book *Prison Masculinities*, authors Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (2001) write about how inmates can find it extremely difficult to negotiate the ultra masculine world in prisons where no one talks about identity. They go on to write that people who work with inmates fail to understand how masculinity plays a role in how these men feel about themselves and others. "Far too little consideration to the ways that manhood and the patterns of men's relationships with one another influence how men end up in prison in the first place, how they function 'inside,' and what happens to them if and when they are released and return to their communities" (Sabo, et al., 2001, p. 3).

Keck's voice work can be described as bearing witness or testifying – a common performance found in the African-American community. His performance strategy requires work both inside and outside the prison. Keck's delicate balancing of working inside prison walls in addition to working outside of the prison, reminds us of the importance of Bridge Workers. As an inside participant, Keck must always be aware of his privilege and humble himself enough to allow the prisoners to share their narratives with him. Once outside of the prison walls, Keck must protect the integrity of those he

advocates for in order to bring a sense of agency from outside the cells of those incarcerated.

This difficult inside work of building trust is crucial. One must adopt a personal commitment to one's self and the men who share their stories. This work involves a political characterization that causes one to consistently reflect on the privilege one has. Keck's work highlights the important political nature of mass incarceration.

Michael Keck's work allows him to go before judges, police, parole officers, jurors and communities, performing the narratives of the incarcerated men while at the same time, helping to change policies to assist these incarcerated men. Like Keck, I work as a Bridge Leader to these African-American males. We have the privilege of coming in and leaving out of the prison, then sharing our knowledge with those in the communities where we work. Michelle Alexander is doing work from the law side to assist as well as educate others regarding policy changes needed. I echo her need for urgency in this matter and offer my strategy and talent in performing, advocacy, and education to be a solution to this situation. As in the case of Alexander's activist inspiration (civil rights lawyers of the 1950's and 1960's), I am equally motivated by the work of civil rights Bridge Leaders such as Fannie Lou Hammer, Ella Baker, and A. Phillip Randolph, who worked between organized institutions and the community.

In my experience of going inside the prison to deliver a motivational message, there are many obstacles an outsider must go through. From walking through heavily guarded sliding doors, showing identification, signing in, wearing a visitor's pass and getting an invisible stamp on your hand which can only be revealed under an inferred light, the level of intensity shifts. I am not allowed to leave the facility unless I have this

mark, which has been placed on me to symbolize I am an outsider and not one of the men who are considered insiders. My privilege allows me to enter this space and share information and be able to exit when I am done.

My job is to deliver a message of: 1) inside work which requires self-analysis and focusing on themselves in positive ways and not on the circumstances that led them to be incarcerated, and 2) re-entry bridges, which is the 'outside' work that is a critical component. To shift that focus toward using what got them incarcerated to prepare for life outside of the prison walls is the goal and does not come easy. In my position, it is crucial that I learn as much from these men so I am able to assist them in ways that can help them begin the work internally to change themselves so that they too walk out of the sliding doors, re-enter society and function toward their personal goals and aspirations. I get the chance to listen to many of their voices before and after my speech. The before and after messages are key because in the before conversation there is much skepticism regarding me and my purpose for being there. After my speech, the tone and mood has dramatically shifted and I tend to get more of the personal narratives and information about why they are incarcerated and their plans upon being released. My speech was critical because it had to do the work of bridging the gap between them and myself.

For the large percentage of inmates who are African-American, anyone entering that prison space, as an outsider, will be viewed with suspicion. Because I may not completely understand their struggle or their story behind bars, it is imperative for me to be perceived as credible. The narratives I have listened to over my numerous prison visits have educated me and can do the same for others, outside of prison, to see they are not bad men. These men made mistakes, as all of us do, but they have value and still have a

life to live. From those narratives, I realized just how much of a challenge it would be for the men to adapt and adjust to being free from imprisonment and the day to day structure of the prison. I began to ask myself questions regarding how each man would make it out in the world from which they have been physically removed.

I am doing the Bridge Work with the inmates by trying to get them to each work internally so they can prepare for this rewriting of norms, beliefs and actions. This process will hopefully allow each man, who is willing to do the work, to begin to be prepared for the world outside of the world behind the bars they have spent residence in. The world they are going to re-enter has changed since they last were present in it; however, for those returning to the locations they resided in before their incarceration, many of those places are the same if not worse, regarding no jobs, crime, drugs, poverty, negative atmospheres and financially struggling to survive. The work they have put in internally will only allow them to withstand these situations for a short period of time. This is why it is crucial that bridges are built to assist them so they can cross over to a side of meaning and productivity. I believe one of those bridges is the community college.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES

From my perspective as an administrator at a local college and having worked as a recruiter/academic advisor, I see the community college as a bridge for these men to gain the knowledge and skills for potential jobs and careers. My college, Shawnee Community College (SCC) is located in Ullin, Illinois and first opened its doors in 1967. The college is located in the southern portion of Illinois and serves five, rural counties in its district. Information from the Shawnee Community College Abstract Project Narrative provides information in regards to the college's target population. "The majority of students enrolled at SCC are educationally and economically disadvantaged and typically underprepared to enter college (E16)." In this report, during the fall semester of 2008, this narrative reported that out of 2,388 students enrolled, 979 were low income, 1,814 were first generation, and 64% were academically underprepared for college. Many of the men who are incarcerated would fall into these categories. Not only SCC but other community colleges serve similar populations. Because of these numbers, it shows community colleges can be very important in relation to serving the needs many of these men may need. Many of these men may have little to no educational background in which a place like the community college would be perfect in assisting men who are freshly released from prison. One major advantage a community college has is the type of programs which are being offered. The colleges provide programs which can help make that transition from being incarcerated to getting a new start on life.

In the book, *Community College: Is it right for you?*, Susan H. Stafford (2006) shares some support for this claim:

Community colleges serve their communities in many other ways. They generate millions of dollars in revenue, help train new leadership, work with community partners to remedy social and economic problems, and are often the vibrant core of athletic, cultural, and artistic life for the community. Most important, they open the door to new opportunities, choices, and futures (Stafford, 2006, p. 6).

The community college has also played a more significant role by being accessible to all Americans no matter what events have taken place in our world and society. Author George B. Vaughan (2006) gives some historical background in his book *The Community College Story*. Vaughan talks about when the baby boomers, from the World War II era, attended colleges during the 1960s decade. The women's and civil rights movements, which were formed to assist disadvantaged individuals, saw the college as an advocate. He also discussed the relevance of how policies and politics were affected nationally because of need for colleges. "The Higher Education Act of 1965, the 1972 amendments, and subsequent legislation at the national level made it possible for virtually anyone who could establish the need to receive financial assistance to attend college. The Higher Education Act, along with other federal and state programs, continues to provide financial assistance to students" (Vaughan, 2006, p. 4).

SCC and other colleges are important resources to assist the released men due to the unique services and programs offered. Programs ranging from vocational, technical, job and skill trainings, one year certificates and two year programs are available for students. These programs are crucial because they provide smaller classroom environments with more in depth discussions, hands on action and the pace of instruction can be comfortable for these men who may have not been in a structured educational

environment in years. These career and educational preparatory courses will train and educate the men and bridge a gap between them and society. Fields in automotive, business, computer programming, electronics, industrial technology, truck driving and welding are a few specific career areas the colleges can give as options to the inmates.

Some institutions may have counselors on their campus and this is an important resource which is necessary as well. Many of the men who have been incarcerated may need assistance due to depression, post-traumatic stress or even more serious mental illness such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. The restraint, confinement, feeling of abandonment from family and friends, psychological stress of having to watch other inmates, guards and dealing with their own conscious from the actions which led them to incarceration can be a major barrier for these men to overcome. Also, many of these may have sexually transmitted diseases which have been treated or untreated that can cause not only them mental stress but others in their lives as well. Counseling for the men is critical because these issues can affect them in regards to concentrating on their assignments and projects for class. Though there are social services agencies that specifically deal with this issue, if a campus has a representative on their site, it could truly be a major benefit considering the inmates would be on the campus and could receive services while there. The same could be said for drug, alcohol abusers, and sexual offenders as well.

Job placement and support, such as the Workforce Investment Act (W.I.A.) are huge in providing assistance that can help with resources for the inmates. Resume building, interviewing tips, dress codes and other basic information can be good for helping many of these men who may have never held a job in their life. These skills can

be developed through job placement programs on the campus. The W.I.A. program can provide some form of monetary assistance, such as individual training vouchers which pay for certified trainings offered by the college. There may be some restriction such as for a sex offender who cannot be in an educational program with children unless their parole officer informs the programs that the inmate is close to completing their program.

In regards to sex offenders as well as other inmates who have been released, housing is a barrier that can negatively affect the men. Especially for campuses who have on-campus housing options, especially family housing. Sex offenders are registered as sex offenders and can't reside in locations where there are children. Ex-convicts are also restricted from living in federal housing areas and for colleges with housing, are not allowed to live on the campus. Though, there are not many community colleges provide on-campus housing, finding housing, especially in federal apartments, can become a barrier.

The label of being an ex-convict has a lasting effect on many of these men and can cause them some restrictions in many ways. The question on the job application asking if they have ever been convicted of a felony is a constant reminder that these men are members of a marginalized group who may receive constant social stereotyping because of this label. Many of the men who re-enter the prison system have found it difficult to adjust to or overcome these labels as it serves as a major barrier that does not seem to be overcome.

Some solutions to help alleviate many of these labels and negative stereotypes must come from the advocates, allies and bridge leaders who have been inside the prison walls, spoke to these men and who understand their struggles. These leaders are the ones

who must advocate for these men and push for policies to be placed to assist them. There are policies and plans to assist our men and women in the military when they return home from duty. Displaced workers are receiving different types of assistance and receiving empathy for losing their jobs. These policies and feelings could be used as a model to assist men who are released from prison. Colleges tend to struggle to increase enrollment, from semester to semester, for many reasons. But, they could reach out to this group of individuals to assist them while at the same time, helping their declining numbers at their institutions. The process would help both parties in the long run with men gaining skills that will help them rebuild and strengthen communities.

President Barack Obama once announced a plan for community colleges to be that bridge for our economic struggles which calls for \$12 billion to fund new programs such as web courses, construction and innovation. “Time and again, when we have placed our bet for the future on education, we have prospered as a result – by tapping the incredible innovative and generative potential of a skilled American workforce” (Shear, & de Vise, 2009). People to work these jobs will be needed and inmates can be those individuals to take on these tasks, continue to produce positive work toward personal redemption, help with the renewal of self and their communities, help a weak economy and provide for themselves and their families.

In my present position and from past professional experience, I strongly believe that the community college can be the resource we can utilize to turn this around. Education is the key and the resources colleges can provide make it a great place to begin this next chapter in these men’s lives. Community colleges work to educate and have a democratic way of teaching and learning to build the community. I am fortunate to

currently work in an institution where I can potentially play a major part in being able to reverse this trend. To re-invest in these men would offer hope to decimated communities and America as a nation. These men can become productive citizens, loving fathers, community elders, supportive mentors, and contribute to the workforce.

I believe education can serve as a beacon of hope for these young men in order for them to not only transform themselves but to come of prison and contribute in a meaningful way. I believe that community college provides a starting point for ex-offenders to not only learn and become educated but learn valuable skills they can learn out in society. Community college becomes a place for these young men to learn something and start again. Due to the stereotypical discrimination, ex-offenders usually face substantial obstacles in finding employment. Most of them lack education and the skills in order to become competitive in a job market. I feel that my work inside of a prison gives me a unique position working to transform these young men, while working on their self-esteem. I am thankful I work in a field that may hold a key which may play a major role in turning this thing around.

THE BRIDGES THAT WERE BUILT FOR ME

My experience of doing ‘bridge work’ began as a youth, through volunteerism. A local agency in Cairo, Community Health and Emergency Services, had a program in their social service field that did outreach into the community. The staff members, worked with the high school to find a group of students to do prevention work in and out of the community. That group was called Peer Persuaders. The mission of that group was to volunteer to go out in the local and surrounding communities to educate others about the negative effects of alcohol, tobacco, other drugs, sex education and other social related issues. We held information sessions as well as created and performed skits to try and find creative ways to get our messages out. I had the opportunity to mediate a town hall meeting with our mayor and city officials. That meeting was about concerns the youth had regarding no types of outlets, recreation or job opportunities. Two of the staff members/mentors, Steve Middleton and Mark Bartlett, both African-American men, made an unexpected visit to my house one summer. They talked to me about my potential, the importance of doing what was right, about being a successful black man. Though I had always had the support from my father and my maternal uncles, this moment was significant to me because it was black men who were active in the community, married, fathers with strong character and respect from others. This gendered moment was a passing of a torch from two successful, young black men to a teenage black youth. As they left, I felt like a new person partly because two men I looked up too had recognized me and saw something in me. Each one of them are still working with young people, Steve is an assistant men’s basketball coach who recruits young scholar athletes to Oklahoma State University and Mark is a program director in Southeast

Missouri working with young men to be responsible fathers in their children's lives. This became the first step for me to begin building bridges in my own as well as surrounding communities.

A year removed from graduating college, as a 23 year old, I got introduced to another form of service that involved my educational background of speaking and performing. That was motivational speaking and it happened to become a match made in heaven. My mentor Mark had taken another job in the Bootheel of Missouri as an advocate for the Bootheel Healthy Start. This organization assisted low-income families in the poverty stricken areas of Southeast Missouri. The program ranged from single parents, men's responsibility, healthy eating and more, by providing conferences, workshops and session to promote positive alternatives. The feeling was that speaking was teaching for people who did not have resources and hope for a better life.

Mark brought a unique idea to me of combining my educational background in speaking and performance experience, to be the motivational speaker for his conference. Drawing on my performance background, I created characters through voice, identity and costume. The purpose of this was to stand in as a neutral person, not exactly my own identity but to represent a fictional person with their own personality, ideas and mannerisms. I dressed up three times and performed each character which drew laughter and entertainment with each having a message about healthy lifestyles and alternatives.

Since 1999, I have been constantly involved in speaking around the states of Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky and locally well over 100 times. While speaking at churches, schools, college, universities, conferences and prisons, I have loved the experience and stayed consistent with my goals. My main goal is to provide resources, through speaking,

based on my own personal experiences or those of others. The messages focus on ways each one of us can be empowered by doing self-evaluation and analysis. By doing this analysis on ourselves, we can learn how to identify our strengths and weaknesses. Once we are comfortable and confident with our own self, focusing on the positive and overcoming our fears, we can make the necessary changes for a better life. Also, by focusing on the positive things we tend to not focus on because we overlook them while trying to change the things we don't like about ourselves. This was an important beginning for me with many opportunities to come.

My journey as a bridge worker began with much uncertainty but each position, as well as the relationships I built, helped me grow personally and professionally. After graduation, I was not sure where I wanted to go and the fear of the unknown led me back to my hometown of Cairo, Illinois. Providing service and outreach was very important to me because that is what was provided to me and it had a positive impact on my life. My friends and I always said we would always go back home to give back, or instilled in us by our parents and mentors. I found a job with a program at a local social service agency called Teen REACH. REACH stands for Responsibility, Education, Achievement, Caring, and Hope. It is an after-school group that helps youth 6-17 years old in areas of tutoring, mentoring, cultural activities, and educational projects to assist the at-risk youth. This was my first professional job. I knew the needs of the community from growing up in Cairo as well as many of the youth but lacked experience in the professional world. The late Rose Wiggins, a counselor, was a bridge worker for me as I entered the professional work field. Rose gave me some advice based on her observation of how things were going. She advised me to be firm with my decisions, be knowledgeable, as

well as observant. Her wisdom and guidance helped to build confidence in me and gave me an ally. She taught me the importance of having someone to guide you along the way especially when beginning a process that is new and unknown to you.

My second professional job was with a local mental health agency and I was a case manager for adults who were mentally challenged. Our job was to teach them basic living skills such as washing their clothes at the local laundry mat, going out to eat at a restaurant, pay their bills and other life skill activities. The unique thing about this job is that I had no formal training in regards to dealing with mentally disabled patients. I found the best way to assist them was to not study my Diagnostic Manual-Intellectual Disability or DM-ID manual, which is a manual used to diagnose mental illness. By speaking with and observing each person, as well as asking questions, helped me learn more about each unique individual and the best way to personally help them or have them help themselves. This situation was one I learned from the people I served and that was rewarding and important in my growth and development. That you never truly know, by looking at a person, what their needs may be or what they are capable of doing. Some people need to be led and the best way to learn how to lead those in need is to interact with them.

I truly felt a strong connection and a desire to serve others, in the social service field, as a youth counselor, I worked with young men and women who had mental disabilities as well as youth who had behavior problems. I struggled with this job and felt defeated for the first time as a professional. I will never forget a young, African-American youth who was smart, had a supporting father and with his wonderful personality. Yet, this young man could not stay out of trouble which challenged me and my position as his counselor. He was running with the wrong crowd and getting in trouble with the law. His

father, an older gentleman, decided to get him counseling which made our paths cross. Things were going well with the individual and joint counseling sessions I had with each as well as the relationship I developed with the then “Italian Stallion” Steve Jett. The late Steve Jett was the States Attorney in Alexander County at that time and was not like many I had dealt with in the past. This man also saw the potential in the young man and decided to work with me and the family as well as giving the young man multiple chances to change his ways. Despite the unified efforts from others, on his behalf, the young man continued to get involved in criminal activity. Mr. Jett gave the young man one last chance to get it together and if he did not, the only choice he had was to be incarcerated. I felt like a failure in this job because I was not able to focus on alternatives for this young man despite growing up in the same community and having graduated from college. I was out of touch with the community in regards to the crime that was present and how many of the young people did not see realistic alternative options to choose from.

I have worked in higher education for almost 10 years when I began working at Shawnee Community College as a Recruiter/Academic Advisor. I got to recruit in the local high schools which I was familiar with from my high school days. I knew the community but I had yet to recruit individuals for college. And personally, I was never comfortable trying to convince or sell someone on a product or idea. A unique situation occurred during this time. My former high school guidance counselor happened to now be a consultant with the college for students from Missouri. Mr. Shaner remembered me from our past and took me under his tutelage. We had strategic meetings about recruitment and ways of meeting goals. Mr. Shaner taught me to always be personable and creative in my recruiting efforts. I quickly learned the importance of focusing on

particular schools along with preparation required to go in and share information with counselors and students. I learned the importance of being personable with those I served which helped strengthen the relation between myself and them. He targeted not only one student but their friends also. At college fairs, he would offer a pizza party for a student and their friend if you just filled out an admissions application. But when the students came over, he began to ask them questions to get to know them and make it personal. I used his techniques to get to the students but created my own style to fit what felt comfortable to me.

In recruitment, my place of comfort was not the college but the classroom setting. The intimate setting allowed me a chance to be personal with students and get more accomplished with the message I was trying to get out. However, I learned to adapt to all of the different places I had to recruit such as the school cafeteria, local basketball games and parades. I did not want to see them as a number but instead as a human being, a special person. I used exercises designed to have students look internally to see what their unique, special talents or gifts were. I showed how many of them struggled to telling me one good thing about themselves but if I asked them to share one negative thing about themselves, they would go on and on. The result was that we, as people, focus on changing ourselves but struggle to tell one good, unique thing about themselves.

That in choosing a major or career path, we can become empowered by knowing what we are good at, what we like or what they desire doing. The purpose was to start getting them to look not at what careers pay the most money but what are they good at, enjoy or desire doing. Having a goal or target and a message really helped me become

more active. But being personable and a resourceful person were equally important in relation to recruiting students but selling our school to their families.

I was allowed to become more involved throughout the college as I was given the responsibility of advising the Student Senate on campus. It was the first time I got to supervise others. I was responsible for guiding future leaders, to be the voice for the student body. One thing I knew was that if I could convince the students they had a voice and responsibility that they could make some moves and changes on campus. Commuter schools are a challenge with getting students to participate in extracurricular activities held on campus so the goal for those leaders was to do good work and stay creative. The focus was to never do the same activity or program the same way twice. If the students came up with fun, educational activities, it would draw crowds and continue to spark interest from their peers every time they put on an event. The biggest hit was a haunted house they put on for the Fall Fest festivities each fall semester. It was so good that even faculty and staff participated. The student leader's confidence begins to grow with an added excitement and enthusiasm for future events and programs. I learned how to serve, lead, also empower others to give their best every time they set a goal and put it into action. After my failed attempts with counseling youth, I found a place of comfort in higher education. However, after 5 years of being at SCC, I had a desire to return to my alma mater and recruit because I needed that challenge to grow professionally, which I did.

I took a job at SIUC in Admissions. My job was to serve the high school students as well as their parents, by being a resourceful admissions representative who was the first face of the university and an ally they could rely on to assist them. I went from

recruiting in 6 to 12 schools to eventually over 100 schools. From traveling to Rockford, Illinois, to St. Louis, Missouri, Southeast Missouri and to Kansas City, Missouri, I met thousands of students, families and school officials. One thing I did learn from those travels and individuals was the differences in people based on their communities, schools, religions, and standards. I learned how critical it was for me to do my research about the people I was going to serve and not assume I knew what they needed. I learned to read profiles of each school to get an idea but I took a unique approach that was crucial but worked. I made up my mind to get to each school early and observe the students, teachers, administration, and atmosphere. I wanted to feel the vibe from the students, see what the atmosphere was like, the relationships between students, teachers and administrators. I quickly adapted my presentations for each school. In the religious schools, I did not do as much entertainment but focused on the research, quality education, strong faculty and alumni. For the minority schools, I focused on scholarships, student organizations, academics, athletics, social life and more. I still added the personal touch of making each student, even in the largest class sizes, to tell me one unique thing about them, and my time in the schools were successful. I shared this technique with my co-workers but it fell on deaf ears until a new Director of Admissions came on board and challenged us to write down 3 students from 3 different schools in which we recruited. I was the first finished and the only one to confidently do this. It is very important that we do the research in learning about others so we can be better equipped to assist them. Too often assumptions get made rather than doing the critical research so it becomes clearer as to what is needed to provide services and be affective in the process. This lesson was one that after I learned, I became better prepared to do my job.

THE JOURNEY INSIDE AND OUT- BRIDGE BUILDING FROM PRISON TO COMMUNITY COLLEGE

My standpoint is what fuels my passion to socially change the world, piece by piece, just as many others have and continue to do. From personal experience, I am confident this work can lead to positive outcomes in negative situations. There are literatures from people who have researched, studied or applied the tools of survival, renewal and personal successes. The work toward finding the answers to our problems or situations starts from within. The internal work we do is critical to what happens to us outside. It takes self-evaluation to have a strong sense of one's identity. For African-American men, this is very crucial to survival. A history of slavery with a present full of mass incarceration gets over-shadowed by the positive impacts made by others who did not become a statistic. To "be the man" or to have this aura of the strong masculine Black man has created many problems within African-American communities. Stereotyping becomes a reality for most that come in contact with Black men due to some of the actions perpetrated by many men who just do not have a real or positive sense of who they are. Media images have long provided definitions for Black men. The multi-millionaire athlete who uses his talents to escape poverty, the rap superstar who uses his vocal and creative skills to tell his story about his not so happy upbringing or surroundings, the drug dealer who sees narcotics as the only way to make money and survive, the man with multiple women who is considered an object of desire... these mass marketed images continue to destroy the minds of Black men, especially young Black youth. African-American author, activist and writer Kevin Powell (2008), in his book *The*

Black Male Handbook: a Blueprint of Life, discusses how the negative images of Black males in the media continue to exist.

Over time, people of all racial backgrounds came to associate Black men with negative characteristics and negative behavior. Black males were viewed with suspicion, and perceived as untrustworthy, violent criminals. This perception of Black men has had a lasting effect, and pervades the minds of millions of people around the world even to this day. (p. 45)

The necessary inside work can provide alternatives to the media-inscribed labels that exist for too many men. These labels continue to follow men just as the incarcerated individual will forever wear the title of felon. There are three steps that, if each Black man takes, will help him to become more knowledgeable about himself and begin to make strides in the right direction, for his life and future. It starts within. I have often used this exercise with high school students so they could begin the internal work and hopefully, find a major or career choice that best fits who they are.

The first step is for each man to reflect and ask himself questions such as, “Who am I?” By facing these inner realities, the good and the not so good, the process toward self-identification begins. In his book, *Do You! 12 Laws to Access the Power in You to Achieve Happiness and Success*, Hip Hop Mogul Russell Simmons (2007) discusses this process and states it as an important initial process. “The first step is knowing yourself--- who you are and what you stand for. And the only way to do that is to be in touch with that higher voice inside of you. To be present and at one with who you are” (Simmons, 2007, p. 45). Many of the men are incarcerated because they made bad choices. Often there are social pressures to show strength when masculinity is questioned, which leads to

dangerous situations. A person must know themselves, realize he does not have to prove anything to anyone, and can walk away from a confrontation without feeling inadequate or less than a man.

The biggest and most challenging move is the second step. This step requires the need to focus internally to find one's own strengths and weaknesses. Many times, a person will focus on all the things they want to change, but never really take time to look at the positive things about themselves. Growing up in poverty, or lack of support from parents, family and community, can deepen one's negative perception of self. And many factors influence the tendency of some Black men to go in the wrong direction.

The third and final step, which I was so fortunate to have taken, is to identify positive role models/advocates who can assist along the way. I was blessed to have a strong bond with my family, grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins, as well as members of the community who encouraged me, educated me, looked out for me, and planted positive information in my mind regarding my potential. Many of these men were living in some of the worst conditions imaginable, and found it unreasonable to expect a young man to go to school, learn and pay attention in a classroom when school is like a playground compared to the harsh, depressed reality of home.

There is an old Chinese Proverb that I learned from one of my uncles, when I was a child: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." To me, teaching is that important. Everyone hungers for knowledge but the best way to help someone is to teach them. My grandmother used to say, "I can tell you anything but the best knowledge is the lessons you learn through experience." Being in the field of education, I know the impact educators can have on students. Even

during slavery, education was seen as a way to be free – not physically free but free in one's mind; that is what education can do for many of the young people today whose minds are engaged by the negative circumstances that life sometimes presents. It is important, especially in academia, for teachers who are educating some of these young Black men to have a real sense of understanding about their background and to understand the power they possess in their role as teacher. Author, activist and feminist bell hooks (1994), in her book *Teaching to Transgress*, speaks to teachers about the importance of modeling respect and engagement.

Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom. To embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage "audience," to consider issues of reciprocity. Teachers are not performers in the traditional sense of the word in that our work is not meant to be a spectacle. Yet it is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning. (p. 11)

Mentoring can assist those who are trying to re-invent themselves. Community organizations, including churches, could play a major role in rehabilitating men who have been mentally, physically, emotionally or spiritually imprisoned. It is critical that the churches do not judge the men because of the actions which led to incarceration, but instead help them to rebuild confidence and self-worth, and provide guidance toward redemption and success.

Especially for young Black men, mentoring can be critical in their growth and development. It creates a support base which can help combat some of the adversities they encountered before and during incarceration. “Mentoring is about the future. It is about changing the world by opening it up for young people. Help a child to dream and to believe in his or her dream, and you help create in place of fear, self-esteem in place of doubt, ambition in place of powerlessness” (Dortch, 2001, p. 7). Mentoring can particularly benefit men who have been incarcerated for years or decades, or who entered the institution at a young age. It can be that bridge to help them catch up with all they missed while being incarcerated, as well as help them understand who they have grown to be during their time behind bars.

I believe that former inmates can be valuable mentors for those who have recently re-entered society. Those who have made a successful transition back into society would be able to discuss their experiences, what they did to succeed in the transition, and strategies to avoid the pitfalls of returning to prison. Sometimes, knowledge from peers can be very important and have a bigger impact because it comes from someone who is familiar with the situation and circumstances inmates have faced.

My Work Within and Outside the Prisons

I have been a motivational speaker since 1999 and have been on programs locally and in other states, speaking publically. My purpose for speaking is to provide positive and motivational information to people in all areas and walks of life. I have spoken at churches, schools, conferences, and colleges, but it was my first visit to the correctional center where my mother works that led me to become more involved and active with incarcerated young Black men. As part of a Black History Program suggested by my mother and the prison Chaplain, I compiled research regarding historical figures such as Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, and Harriet Tubman. I got to the prison early so I could get a feel of what things would be like. I always try to take time to get a sense of the surroundings, the audience, the vibe, the mood, and the aura, so I can make sure my speech has some kind of impact. By doing this, I can usually get a good sense of how to tailor the presentation to the audience and setting. For example, I determine the performative balance between entertaining and educating. In this case, I was shocked to see the number of inmates who were African-American and how many appeared to be younger than me. While there were also Hispanic and Caucasian men present, there was triple the number of Black men. I often speak about people making changes from within and how that manifests outside of their lives. I decided in that moment to use some poetry that I had brought that would focus on the inmates looking internally to find answers to some questions I posed. One of the older, Black inmates approached me and informed me that he and many of the other men would analyze and critique me very closely. Here I stood; young Black man in a dress shirt and tie (which is not the attire I choose anymore) coming into their world to talk to them, but with the privilege to leave while they have to

stay. His wariness made sense and I accepted this challenge by inviting him for some feedback and dialogue after the speech. I wanted to see what he thought about my speech. This is similar to having participants fill out an evaluation at a conference to see how the message was perceived – only the feedback is immediate and face-to-face.

My plan was to provide hope, support, and encouragement through my speech for the Black History Program at the prison. I found myself giving an informative speech which had similar structure to those I used with prospective high school students and parents seeking knowledge about college. The attempt was to set a tone with the speech which would require self-reflection and provide resources for a realistic plan to carry forward for their own personal success. My speech focused on specific topics which allowed the inmates to be reflective about their own lives. Those topics involved were learning who we are by identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, having a 3-D vision (Dream, Dedication, and Desire), a PHD (Poor, Hungry and Driven) attitude, and being the Chosen One (a Star Wars reference). These topics provided information which could help them personally and professionally, if they chose to use them in their lives. I followed the introduction of topics with information about my profession in education as well as an open invitation for them to contact me for further assistance.

The first topic, which stressed learning who we are by identifying personal strengths and weaknesses, was a technique I used when I worked as a college recruiter. I encourage the audience to think about the positive and negative traits, skills, or talents they possess and write them down in two columns on a sheet a paper. By doing this step, each person can visually see the areas where they are strong or need to improve. This process could be used in making a choice regarding which major to chose for college or

even what career to pursue. To focus on these two areas could help make future decisions easier when the time came to do so. Each man can do this technique now and begin to plan what direction they want to pursue or research when they are released from prison.

The second topic, having a 3-D vision, challenges each man to dream, have dedication, and desire towards a better life and lifestyle. Everyone has dreams, which usually can lead to motivation toward a desired job, career, or overcoming an obstacle. Despite their circumstances of being incarcerated, each man should still have dreams, be dedicated to them and possess a desire for a better life.

The third topic I discuss is having a PHD attitude. The acronym stands for Poor Hungry and Driven. In the book, *"Success is a Choice"*, the creator of the phrase, Mario Gabelli explains the meaning to author Rick Pitino (1997).

Now I'm not talking about people being poor economically. I'm talking about being poor in terms of knowledge, about people who are constantly searching to learn more, to find more wisdom. And hungry in this context refers to those with a tremendous desire to succeed, people who won't ever be satisfied with an ordinary level of accomplishment. And driven people are the ones who set ambitious goals and then pursue them with real ferocity. (Pitino and Reynolds, 1997, p. 199)

These qualities can be used to help each man remain focused on the goals they have set for themselves especially through the difficult times they may face while trying to adjust to time between incarceration and being released.

The final topic I used was in recognizing we are the Chosen One. This was a Star Wars movie reference but I found that the meaning behind it was appropriate to share with these inmates. In the movie, this reference was made to the one Jedi warrior who

would possess the 'Force' or strength to lead the good over the evil. This person possessed qualities that no one else had, and it was a great strength. Each person has talents, abilities and qualities that are specific to them. By acknowledging and acting upon them, each person can make their mark doing whatever it is they choose to do.

I remember a particular inmate I met who, with the help of his instructor in the prison and my colleagues at SIUC, got released from prison, enrolled at the university and is doing well. It was also the efforts from his mother and family to make sure he was led in a new direction and provided the resources necessary to have a fresh start...a new chance at life. I hope he continues to move forward and serves as an example to other men with similar backgrounds and those who have misconceived notions regarding men from this marginalized group. I continue to share my experiences within the prison to colleagues, friends and even people I just meet to inform them of the men I have met. The time spent inside the facilities changed my perceptions and feelings regarding individuals who are incarcerated. I have become more understanding, empathetic, and eager to be a Bridge Leader to help them get a second chance in life. By speaking to others, I hope to create allies who will be open to providing assistance, in different areas, to the men so they can avoid the staggering statistics of recidivism.

Outlook for the Present and Future...

In November of 2010, I left my job at SIUC to return to Shawnee Community College as the Director of Student Support Services. My new program is designed to assist first-generation, low-income or disabled students with academic and personal support while at the college to assisting them in transitioning on to a four-year university. The program provides resources through personal enhancement and career development workshops as well as tutoring and cultural activities. In my role as administrator, I believe that Student Support Services can bridge the gap between incarceration and education upon re-entry into society.

While several of the inmates I have spoken to have taken some form of college classes, the majority of young men do not even have a General Educational Development (GED). There has to be career assessment to help these young men identify the career paths they may want to choose based upon their own strengths and weaknesses. There has to be a thorough explanation of financial resources and support for these men after they are released from prison. Many of the men had no income before incarceration, so it is important to find resources and make it clear how to access them. First, there must be a process to get the young men acquainted with campus life. Second, it is important to show the men how registration works, classroom etiquette, student involvement, tutoring, student work opportunities, study habits, time management, attendance policy and so forth. Third, there needs to be a plan in place to ensure they have services to assist them when things get tough (as they tend to on a college campus) due to class assignments, projects and of course the unknown elements that happen in everyday life. All of these

things plus others related to assisting these men from prison life to that of a college student, must be taken into consideration for the men to make a successful transition.

My plans and ideas are to help bridge the gap for young men and their path back into society. Implementing open door policies that can let the men know there are valuable allies and support systems for them. To provide step-by-step instruction in regard to the admissions process, financial aid counseling, and information about majors with a realistic outlook of the job market in that career path can give concrete steps to follow. This process will include trainings and workshops with the small business and development departments, as well as educational seminars to discuss the resources that are needed to prepare for their career journey. A very important element to consider is having counseling and tutoring available to assist the men when they get overwhelmed or have a difficult time adjusting to the beginning, midterm and final exam sessions. The men can take college transfer tours or cultural trips, based on the conditions set by their parole officer, to learn more about the process of transferring to a university, lifestyle of a larger college campus, and exposure to many of the unique historical sites they have not experienced before. These trips can increase their knowledge and expand their horizons regarding their future endeavors. Lastly, by increasing their involvement in student organizations, they can share their knowledge with others and learn from their peers.

It would be helpful for administration to continue to research the prison population in order to have a better understanding of the men's needs upon release. Additionally, attending seminars, conferences, and trainings and finding financial sources to help provide more learning opportunities would help faculty and staff members. Cultural diversity trainings are important as well to discuss some of the differences that

will be evident between those providing service and those receiving it. It is also important to engage in academic and career advisement with the students through orientation sessions and developing a campus-wide mentoring program to monitor student's grades and issues. The more time faculty and staff spend learning can only help provide better service to the men.

In the book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit (1995) shares her thoughts on the purpose of education.

What we need to bring to our schools: experiences that are so full of the wonder of life, so full of connectedness, so embedded in the context of our communities, so brilliant in the insights that we develop and the analyses that we devise, that all of us, teachers and students alike, can learn to live lives that leave us truly satisfied. (p. 104)

Delpit's thoughts bring optimism and provide positive ideas about what education can do for all involved. The experiences for both the men, who are now students, and the faculty/staff can assist each other in learning and may change their perspectives and journeys in life. Being exposed to the lives of others can provide growth through the knowledge gained. The connection is vital especially if each party is able to assist each other. Educators and students both giving and receiving information makes the educational process a fulfilling one. Educators can take what they have learned in the classrooms out to their own communities and help educate others about the stereotypes that sometimes force our opinions of one another. The men can take the lessons and skills they are learning to the community to help it grow and prosper. In the end, it can lead to

satisfaction for many people and that bridge which helped bring those sides together was from the resources provided through the community college.

I also hope to be able to be an advocate for these men when they return to the communities they grew up in. The bridges built for me proved to be beneficial in my personal and professional life. The relationships I developed from one-on-one mentoring, service-learning, community involvement, and structured program activities prepared me for college. The resources and knowledge I gained through the classes, organizations, instruction, instructors, and peers led to my current professional position. Having had the experiences I have, I am able to bridge the gap between the men and society especially through the community college. I can continue to learn about the experiences and narratives from the inmates, inside and outside of the facilities, and share that knowledge. I can use my professional position to help develop programs, resources and information to further assist previously-incarcerated Black men. The professional connections I have, and continue to make, can be vital to the success of the men who return home. I feel that my time spent talking with people in the prisons, and the work I have done with those released can help me foster more relationships and assist in many ways. I would like to form a strong support system for these men to help them in all of the areas I have mentioned throughout this paper.

The same thing can happen for these Black men who deserve a chance to fulfill their dreams and goals in life. By being engaged, doing self-analysis of their strengths and weaknesses, and taking advantage of the resources at a community college, the inmates can increase their knowledge of self and develop skills which can lead to a career in the workforce. The creation of programs designed to enhance their awareness about college

preparation and career options can only deepen the men's understanding of what is needed to move forward in their lives. The transition from prison to the community can be just as scary and full of the unknown as it was going from community to prison. The major difference is that we do not want to see the men return to the prison and experience that situation any more. If we do these things, there will be a significant decrease in the number of Black men who are incarcerated, and an increase in the number of Black men who graduate from the community college. The process will require dedication, not only from each of them, but also from the assistance of others.

The work is ongoing. Prisons continue to be built and the populations within continue to grow. Recidivism percentages remain high and communities struggle to grow without the service of the men who are not there to help build them up. The only way that the declining number of men enrolled at an institution of higher learning (rather than increased numbers at the department of corrections) can move forward is if the area between the men and the community college provides that stable bridge toward a solid transition forward. Continued dialogue and learning through doing is vital to making the necessary changes which can only help each person involved grow inside and out. I conclude this research paper with the powerful and significant words of Nelson Mandela: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

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